NUMB. CCLXXIII.

The SPECTATOR.

Notandi sunt tibi Mores Hor.

Saturday, January 12. 1712

HAVING examined the Action of *Paradise Loſt*, let us in the next place conſider the Actors. Theſe are what *Ariſtotle* means by the Fable and the Manners, or what we generally call them in *Engliſh*, the Fable and Characters.

He has excelled all the Heroic Poets that ever wrote, in the multitude and variety of his Characters. Every God that is admitted into his Poem, has a Part which would have been ſuitable to no other Deity. His Princes are as much diſtinguiſhed by their Manners as by their Dominions; and even thoſe among them, whoſe Characters ſeem wholly made up of Courage, differ from one another in the particular kinds of Courage in which they excell. In ſhort, there is ſcarce a Speech or Action in the *Iliad*, which the Reader may not aſcribe to the Perſon that ſpeaks or acts, without ſeeing his Name at the Head of it.

Homer does not only outſhine all other Poets in the Variety, but alſo in the Novelty of his Characters. He has introduced among his *Grecian* Princes a Perſon who had lived thrice the Age of Man, and converſed with *Theſeus*, *Hercules*, *Polyphemus*, and the whole Race of Heroes. His principal Actor is the Wife of a Goddeſs, not to mention the Son of a Goddeſs, who has likewiſe a Place in his Poem, and the venerable *Trojan* Prince, who was the Father of ſo many Kings and Heroes. There is in theſe ſeveral Characters of *Homer*, a certain Dignity as well as Novelty, which adapts them in a more peculiar manner to the Nature of an Heroic Poem. Tho', at the ſame time, to give them greater variety, he has deſcribed a *Vulcan*, that is a Buffoon among his Gods, and a *Therſites* among Mortals.

Virgil falls infinitely ſhort of *Homer* in the Characters of his Poem, both as to their Variety and Novelty. *Æneas* is indeed a perfect Character, but *Achates*, tho' he is ſtiled the Hero's Friend, has nothing in the whole Poem which may deſerve that Title. *Gyas*, *Mneſteus*, *Sergeſtus* and *Cloanthus* are all of them Men of the ſame Stamp and Character,

Fortemque Gyan, fortemque Cloanthum

There are indeed ſeveral very natural Incidents in the Part of *Æneas*; as that of *Dido* cannot be ſufficiently admired. I do not ſee any thing new or particular in *Turnus*. *Pallas* and *Evander* are Copies of *Hector* and *Priam*, as *Lauſus* and *Mezentius* are almoſt Parallels to *Pallas* and *Evander*. The Characters of *Niſus* and *Euryalus* are beautiful, but too common. In ſhort, there is neither that Variety nor Novelty in the Perſons of the *Æneid*, which we meet with in thoſe of the *Iliad*.

If we look into the Characters of *Milton*, we ſhall find that he has introduced all the Variety that his Poem was capable of receiving. The whole Species of Mankind was in two Perſons at the time to which the Subject of his Poem is confined. We have, however, four diſtinct Characters in theſe two Perſons. We ſee Man and Woman in the higheſt Innocence and Perfection, and in the moſt abject State of Guilt and Infirmity. The two laſt Characters are, indeed, very common and obvious, but the two firſt are not only more magnificent, but more new than any Characters either in *Virgil* or *Homer*, or indeed in the whole Circle of Nature.

Milton was ſo ſenſible of this Defect in the Subject of his Poem, and of the few Characters it would afford him, that he has brought into it two Actors of a Shadowy and Fictitious Nature, in the Perſons of Sin and Death, by which means he has interwoven in the Body of his Fable a very beautiful and well invented Allegory. But notwithſtanding the Fineneſs of this Allegory may attone for it in ſome meaſure, I cannot think that Perſons of ſuch a Chymerical Exiſtence are proper Actors in an Epic Poem; becauſe there is not that meaſure of Probability annexed to them, which is requiſite in Writings of this kind.

Virgil has, indeed, admitted Fame as an Actreſs in the *Æneid*, but the Part ſhe acts is very ſhort, and none of the moſt admired Circumſtances in that Divine Work. We find in Mock-Heroic Poems, particularly in the *Diſpenſary* and the *Lutrin*, ſeveral Allegorical Perſons of this Nature, which are very beautiful in thoſe Compoſitions, and may, perhaps, be uſed as an Argument, that the Authors of them were of Opinion, that ſuch Characters might have a Place in an Epic Work. For my own part, I ſhould be glad the Reader would think ſo, for the ſake of the Poem I am now examining, and muſt further add, that if ſuch empty unſubſtantial Beings may be ever made uſe of on this occaſion, there were never any more nicely imagined, and employed in more proper Actions, than thoſe of which I am now ſpeaking.

Another Principal Actor in this Poem is the great Enemy of Mankind. The part of *Ulyſſes* in *Homer's Odiſſey* is very much admired by *Ariſtotle*, as perplexing that Fable with very agreeable Plots and Intricacies, not only by the many Adventures in his Voyage, and the Subtilty of his Behaviour, but by the various Concealments and Diſcoveries of his Perſon in ſeveral parts of that Poem. But the Craft of Being I have now mentioned, makes a much longer Voyage than *Ulyſſes*, puts in practice many more Wiles and Stratagems, and hides himſelf under a greater variety of Shapes and Appearances, all of which are ſeverally detected, to the great Delight and Surprize of the Reader.

We

We may likewise observe with how much Art the Poet has varied several Characters of the Persons that speak in his inferior Assembly. On the contrary, how has he represented the whole Godhead exerting it self towards Man in its full Benevolence under the Three-fold Distinction of a Creator, a Redeemer and a Comforter!

Nor must we omit the Person of *Raphael*, who amidst his Tenderness and Friendship for Man, shews such a Dignity and Condescention in all his Speech and Behaviour, as are suitable to a Superior Nature.

There is another Circumstance in the principal Actors of the *Iliad* and *Æneid*, which gives a particular Beauty to those two Poems, and was therefore contrived with very great Judgment. I mean the Authors having chosen for their Heroes Persons who were so nearly related to the People for whom they wrote. *Achilles* was a *Greek*, and *Æneas* the remote Founder of *Rome*. By this means their Countrymen (whom they principally proposed to themselves for their Readers) were particularly attentive to all the parts of their Story, and sympathized with their Heroes in all their Adventures. A *Roman* could not but rejoice in the Escapes, Successes and Victories of *Æneas*, and be grieved at any Defeats, Misfortunes or Disappointments that befel him; as a *Greek* must have had the same regard for *Achilles*. And it is plain, that each of those Poems have lost this great Advantage, among those Readers to whom their Heroes are as Strangers, or indifferent Persons.

Milton's Poem is admirable in this respect, since it is impossible for any of its Readers, whatever Nation, Country or People he may belong to, not to be related to the Persons who are the principal Actors in it; but what is still infinitely more to its Advantage, the principal Actors in this Poem are not only our Progenitors, but our Representatives. We have an actual Interest in every thing they do, and no less than our utmost Happiness or Misery is concerned, and lies at Stake in all their Behaviour.

I shall subjoyn as a Corollary to the foregoing Remark, an admirable Observation out of *Aristotle*, which hath been very much misrepresented in the Quotations of some Modern Criticks. 'If a Man 'of perfect and consummate Virtue falls into a Mis-'fortune, it raises our Pity, but not our Terror, be-'cause we do not fear that it may be our own 'Case, who do not resemble the Suffering Person. But as that great Philosopher adds, 'If we see a 'Man of Virtues thirt with Infirmities, fall into 'any Misfortune, it does not only raise our Pity 'but our Terror; because we are afraid that the 'like Misfortunes may happen to our selves, who 'resemble the Character of the Suffering Person.

I shall take another Opportunity to observe, that a Person of an absolute and consummate Virtue should never be introduced in Tragedy, and shall only remark in this Place, that this Observation of *Aristotle*, tho' it may be true in other Occasions, does not hold in this; because in the present Case, though the Persons who fall into Misfortune are of the most perfect and consummate Virtue, it is not to be considered as what may possibly be, but what actually is our own Case, since we are embark'd with them on the same Bottom, and must be Partakers of their Happiness or Misery.

In this, and some other very few Instances, *Aristotle*'s Rules for Epic Poetry (which he had drawn from his Reflections upon *Homer*) cannot be supposed to quadrate exactly with the Heroic Poems which have been made since his Time; as it is plain his Rules would have been still more perfect, had he have perused the *Æneid* which was made several hundred Years after his Death.

In my next I shall go through other parts of Milton's *Poem; and hope that what I shall then advance, as well as what I have already written, will not only serve as a Comment upon* Milton, *but upon* Aristotle.

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